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Deadly Counterfeit Air Bags Are Making Their Way Into Vehicles

Federal regulators are accelerating arrests and car companies are warning dealers to be more vigilant as knockoffs are being installed into vehicles during postcrash repairs

By *Ryan Felton* [Follow](#)

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Destiny Byassee might have survived the crash that killed her last June if it weren't for the counterfeit air bag that blew apart in her face.

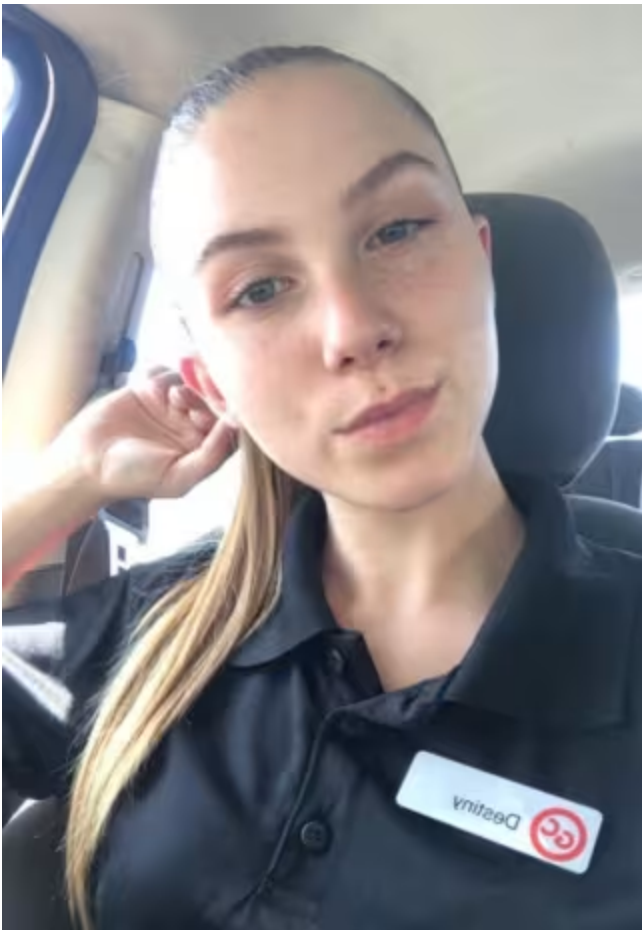
Unbeknownst to the 22-year-old mother of two, the bogus device was installed in her Chevrolet Malibu prior to her purchasing the car from a used-car seller, according to a lawsuit filed by the family in May.

When it went off, it exploded "like a grenade" and sprayed the car with sharp metal and plastic, slicing open her neck, according to the lawsuit. By the time emergency responders arrived, she was found unresponsive and gasping for air, the lawsuit states and medical records show.

The troubling problem for automakers and law enforcement: This deadly incident isn't an isolated one. It is one of at least five in the past year in which people have been killed or seriously injured by counterfeit air bags, an unusually high number in such a short time span, according to the Automotive Anti-Counterfeiting Council, an industry-led group that counts General Motors, Ford Motor and Volkswagen among its members.

And those are only the known cases, experts say. Many go unreported because they are difficult to track, and criminals have gotten better at evading detection. "That's the scary part," said Bob Stewart, the council's president.

Federal regulators have been cracking down via a series of arrests and convictions since last summer, including an indictment in May of two individuals alleged to have sold thousands of unauthorized air bags—many made of used and counterfeit parts—that were listed on eBay as in brand-new condition.



Destiny Byassee died as the result of a car crash.

million vehicles for potentially dangerous air-bag inflators made by Tennessee-based parts supplier ARC Automotive.

Car companies are also warning dealers to be more vigilant, with many knockoffs bearing logos and markings almost identical to those on legitimate brands. Mazda recently discovered fake modules, which contain the air bag and sensors that direct it when to deploy, made to look like those produced by auto supplier Autoliv. In this case, the fakes have an obvious tell: Autoliv is misspelled on the inflator.

The recent activity is reviving concerns about counterfeit air bags entering the U.S. illegally and making their way into vehicles, often as replacement parts installed during postcrash repairs. Carmakers warn dealers to watch out for counterfeits when satisfying recall campaigns—such recall fixes are usually performed by manufacturers' franchised dealerships.

It also comes as federal regulators are weighing whether to order the recall of an estimated 45

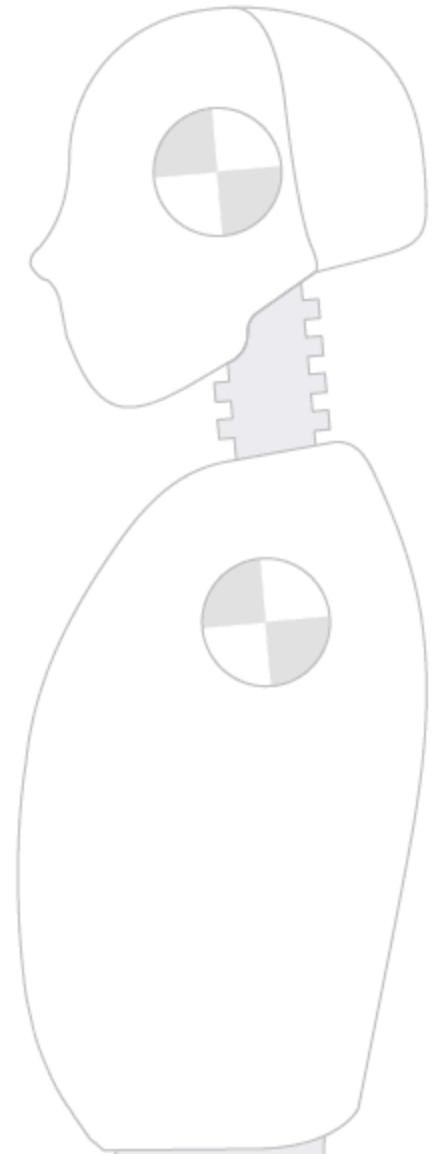
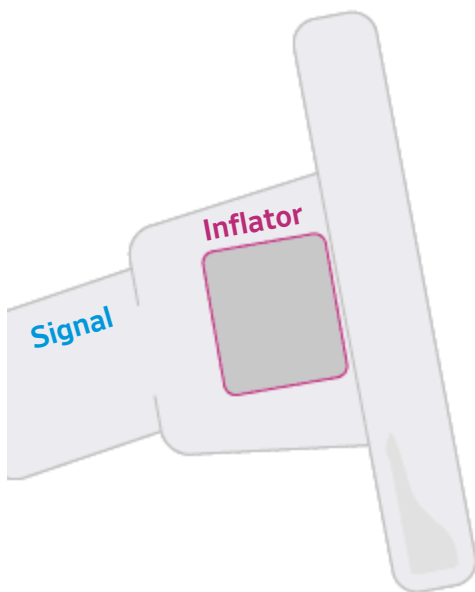
How Vehicle Air Bags Work

Air-bag systems rely on an explosive chemical reaction that releases gas to inflate the bag. Counterfeit parts can fail to deploy or release metal shrapnel during deployment.

If speed sensors detect a sudden stop, a **signal** is sent to the inflator.

A spark of electricity ignites chemicals inside the **inflator**, setting off a reaction that releases gas.

An **air bag** can inflate in about 1/20th of a second. It then immediately begins to deflate to soften the impact.



Sources: AAA; Insurance Institute for Highway Safety
Peter Santilli

Automakers worry such a massive undertaking could result in anxious drivers and repair shops unwittingly receiving the phony modules. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the top U.S. auto-safety regulator, is reviewing comments from ARC and automakers on the potential recall order and has yet to make a decision on the matter. ARC has said that extensive field tests show no defect and the air-bag ruptures that have occurred are few and isolated.

While air bags are intended to save lives—and most work effectively—they can be lethal if not made properly. One reason is that a component known as the inflator contains hazardous

chemicals that ignite during a crash, rapidly filling the cushion with a gas.

Those materials need to be handled and assembled correctly or they risk detonating like a small bomb, blowing apart the module.

Takata, a former auto-parts supplier, initiated one of the largest U.S. recalls in history due to defective air bags linked to deadly explosions.

When a manufacturer-installed air bag deploys in a crash, an authentic, model-specific replacement is needed for the car, automakers and experts say. Counterfeit air bags typically get introduced when vehicles in such crashes are fixed by independent repair shops that purchased fakes. Meanwhile, counterfeiters are getting more sophisticated in dodging U.S. authorities.

Rather than ship fully built modules to the U.S., they are increasingly turning to small parcel packages to send the pirated parts individually, making them tougher to detect, government and car-industry officials say. The devices are then assembled and sold stateside at steep discounts by brokers and associates working with them.

Some sell for as little as \$100 to \$350 a piece, court records show. An authentic air-bag module can cost upward of \$1,000.

Tens of thousands of counterfeit air bags have been seized by law-enforcement authorities in recent years, industry officials say.



At American Honda Motor in Torrance, Calif., an example of a certified air-bag module next to a counterfeit air-bag module filled with colored foam. PHOTO: ROGER KISBY FOR THE WSJ

“We don’t know how much gets missed on the entry,” said Thomas Duffy, a special agent with the Department of Homeland Security who has led some investigations of counterfeit air bags. “We don’t know how much of it is being assembled here.”

The allure for counterfeiters: Air bags are a highly commoditized product, and as such, the necessary components to make them are easy to copy and can lead to a significant profit, even if they aren’t functional.

Duffy said that often counterfeiters will order a front plate for an air-bag module with a brand’s logo, so it appears new, and then find the rest of the necessary components from auto junkyards. In one case he investigated, Duffy said, the counterfeiter made roughly \$200 in profit for each air bag unit it had produced.

“Behind it is a Frankenstein hodgepodge of different parts, used parts that have been put together,” he said.

Unauthorized parts

The problem has been on the government’s radar for some time.

Early last decade, U.S. auto-safety regulators warned of independent repair shops installing counterfeits, saying roughly 100 different models were at risk and the imitations were mostly coming from overseas.

During the Takata air-bag crisis, automakers were alarmed to find that some cars brought in for recall repairs had at some point been outfitted with fakes, including some that were just empty shells, said Teena Bohi, a Toyota brand-protection analyst.

The industry made some progress last decade clamping down on imitations. But the pandemic complicated those efforts as federal authorities shifted their attention to stop other fraud, and the surge in online shopping gave counterfeiters a wider customer base, government and industry experts say.

The imitation air bag in Byassee’s Chevy Malibu had parts traced to a China-based outfit called Jilin Province Detiannuo Safety Technology, according to the lawsuit filed by her family. Jilin’s website says it was founded in 2009 and manufactures components for various products, including air-bag inflators, life jackets and automatic fire extinguishers.

General Motors, which assisted in identifying the components, confirmed that Jilin isn't an authorized supplier for its own air-bag replacement parts. Jilin's owner, Dong Gang, said the company doesn't have U.S. clients and wasn't involved in the repair.

Police estimate Byassee was going about 30 miles an hour when she rear-ended another car and hit a pole. The sedan's front end was crumpled, but the rest of the vehicle was largely intact.

"You don't have to be a biomechanical expert or accident reconstructionist to look at that vehicle as a layperson and say, 'Yeah, that person should've walked away,' " said Andrew Parker Felix, a lawyer representing Byassee's family.

Her Malibu had previously been owned by car-rental firm Enterprise and then sold at auction to used-car seller DriveTime. At some point, a repair shop in Hollywood, Fla., replaced the air bag with one that contained counterfeit parts after a 2022 crash, according to the lawsuit. It couldn't be determined how the Jilin-made parts were purchased or when exactly they were installed.



A fake air bag, left, is missing certain quality-check stickers.

RYAN FELTON

Enterprise said it is investigating the incident and it wasn't involved in the Malibu repair. DriveTime said it wasn't aware of the earlier crash, and that it doesn't buy vehicles involved in disclosed accidents where air bags have been deployed.

The repair shop named in the suit, Jumbo Automotive, didn't respond to requests for comment.

Almost identical

Stewart, the anticounterfeit official who also works at GM as a brand-protection manager, said some of the fakes are so convincing that it takes a trained eye to see the differences.

At a GM office north of Detroit, he spread out two air bags—a real one and a fake. They looked identical except that the fake one was missing certain quality-check stickers and had a Chevy logo that appeared to be slightly smaller than the legitimate one.

In March, law enforcement raided an auto repair shop in the Miami area, discovering nearly 300 counterfeit air bags, including nonfunctional ones filled with junk. The shop owner was charged with several dozen felonies, court records show. The owner's attorney said his client wasn't in a position to know whether the air bags were fake and had cooperated with law enforcement.

That same month, a retired auto mechanic in Tennessee pleaded guilty to trafficking counterfeit air bags, buying parts from China, assembling them here and then selling the knockoffs on eBay to repair shops for \$100 to \$725 each.

Over the past decade, automakers have intensified lobbying efforts to ban the sale and installation of imitations. Nearly three dozen states have adopted such prohibitions.

Automakers have also urged eBay to stop the sale of all air bags and related parts on its website, arguing a ban is the only effective way to stop the proliferation of knockoffs. Other websites, such as Amazon.com and Alibaba, have policies that ban sales of air-bag parts.

An eBay spokesperson said it only allows preapproved sellers who follow federal and state laws to sell air bags. Violators can face permanent suspension.

One of the biggest challenges for the auto industry is how to alert customers who might have purchased a car with a counterfeit air bag. "If people go out and buy a high-end luxury purse for \$50 on the street, or they're getting a poorly printed knockoff jersey, they know they're buying a counterfeit good," said Duffy, the federal agent.

—*Selina Cheng contributed to this article.*

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